

Winnie Ponson

From Fashion Ingénue to Retail Legend

Text by Rona Coster



Winnie Ponson has been a successful retailer on Aruba for the past 50 years, fueled by a unique blend of intuition and experience. At the age of 19, she decided to go into business on her own, and even flew to Bogota, Colombia, to explore the idea of opening a flower shop.

Against the backdrop of island life in the '60s, such bold, independent plans were unusual, especially when conceived by a young female with just a dream and few resources.

At school, Winnie had a penchant for math, which reassured her that she could handle practically anything. And thus, encouraged by her friends and parents, she opened a modest dress shop, Eva Boutique, on the second floor of the Rio Bar on Main Street in Oranjestad. The second-floor location was all she could afford, and her hand-drawn store sign featured a logo of an apple missing two bites. Apparently Eve was faced with more than one temptation, the second being fashion!

From the very beginning, Winnie embraced the rule "It's about the client, not about me," buying the latest prêt-à-porter and haute-couture creations for the ladies who went out dancing to the Aruba Caribbean Hotel every weekend, swaying to the sound of the George Fasola Band in the stylish Klompen Club.

Men wore elegant dinner jackets, and the ladies, influenced by royalty and movie stars, were resplendent in cocktail dresses—strapless, with

Winnie and Liza



Photo by Steve Keith

narrow waists over big skirts—selected by Winnie on trips to New York, and later, when her chic clientele became hungry for continental styles, Paris and Dusseldorf.

Driven by the need to mine and exploit her talents, Winnie diversified into shoes and fashion accessories, and towards the end of the '60s, Eva Boutique boasted a high-fashion atelier, with a talented in-house designer and partner, Sonia Schnog, watching over as many as five seamstresses.

When the second-floor location became cramped, Winnie boldly moved a bit further east on Main Street, opening a street-level boutique with the same sure-footed conviction that led her to open her business in the first place.

Stretching herself further, she added bathing suits to the mix of merchandise carried in her store. Advised by her fashionista girlfriend Naomi Weisberg, Winnie stocked her boutique with Gottex Swimwear from Israel, long before the mega brand

went global.

Appreciative of the glamorous and fashionable line, Winnie sold quality swimsuits and après swimwear from that Nassaustraat location to tourists and locals. Aruba's hotel pool decks would never be the same again, having been introduced to the color and flair of the revolutionary designs.

In 1967, another decisive move took Winnie into the Sheraton Hotel, where she opened her first hotel store. The store was infused with Antillean charm, creating a unique shopping experience. She later also checked into the Aruba Caribbean Hotel, allowing her inner entrepreneur to shine.

"I was determined," she explains, "to take a chance, to rise to the opportunity. I was fearless and had the notion that women should do something for themselves and their children. It was a man's world, and I was making inroads, changing the way women were perceived at the time, and I knew it."

The '80s in Aruba delivered an unprecedented

economic boom. Main Street was flourishing, and the hotels were expanding. But the amazing economic upswing was about to come to an abrupt downturn with the collapse of the Venezuelan bolivar in 1984. Then Aruba's oil refinery shut down in 1985, and the Island experienced a spiraling slump, along with the rest of the region.

"I am a long-distance runner, not a sprinter," Winnie says. Having sold the store in town in the nick of time, she kept Gottex and repositioned her business, opening additional stores at the hotels—including the Holiday Inn and the then-Concorde, today the Westin Resort Aruba—basing her operations in the tourist sector, and putting her faith in the tried-and-true adage "What goes down, must come up!"

And it did. By that time, overseeing a growing empire, Winnie needed help. Hers came from a much-appreciated direction, her son Anthony, who had just graduated from university and returned to

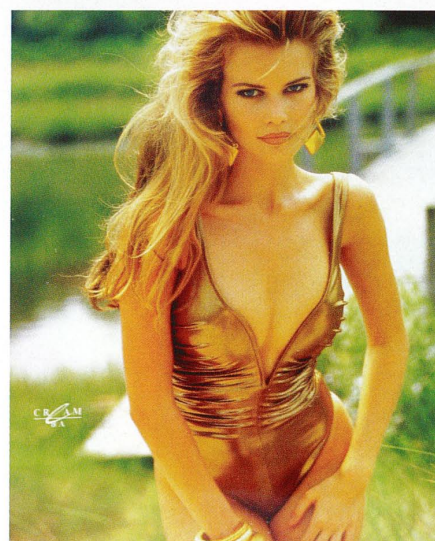
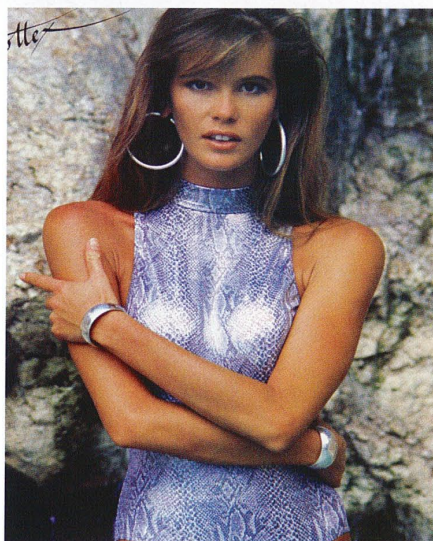
Aruba—a computer whiz and a freewheeling and creative entrepreneur all wrapped in one.

We could probably write a lengthy, fun article about Anthony Blok and how he had the excellent sense to marry Liza Ponse-Blok, but our focus is on Winnie this time, celebrating her 80th birthday, her 50th anniversary in business, and the strength, flexibility, and resourcefulness she demonstrated throughout, resulting in six wonderfully merchandised and decorated Eva Boutiques—at the Radisson Aruba Resort, Casino & Spa, Costa Linda Beach Resort, Westin Resort Aruba, Renaissance Mall, Holiday Inn Sunspree and Casa Del Mar—as well as a European fashion boutique, Entre Nous, at the Renaissance Mall, and four major fashion and gift stores at the hotels, including Costa Linda, the Westin Aruba Resort, the Marriott Ocean Club and the Radisson Aruba Resort, Casino & Spa.

Anthony met gorgeous Liza in 1991, and by 1995, she joined the business, adding her contemporary sense of fashion and innate business smarts to the already-successful formula. “With Anthony taking over finance, Liza took over the buying, and the rest is history!” Winnie proclaims.

“Working as a family,” Winnie recounts, “we were able to break through, rise above all challenges, with each of us applying his own special gifts to a particular segment of our enterprise.” Anthony also diversified into construction and real estate development, acquiring the old home in which Winnie was born and turning it into a successful condominium building in town, then buying an adjacent lot and creating Oranjestad’s most prestigious addresses, the Miramar and Marisol buildings.

Having been born in the year Amelia Earhart completed her 1st transatlantic solo flight, landing in Ireland, and having transitioned to the iPhone 5, Winnie sees the world philosophically. She loves to visit the office and check on the bank balances as much as she enjoys spending time with her bright and entrepreneurial grandchild. “It runs in the family,” she says. 



Pictured are some of Gottex's past campaign images



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